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Lemus, Albelino Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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First Year Seminar Latino Interview
Interview with Albelino Lemus
November 5, 1998
Interviewer: Janis Tippie

JT: . . . and I'm interviewing Al Lemus, right?

AL: Albelino

JT: Albelino, o.k.

AL: Albelino Lemus

JT: Albelino Lemus. Where were you born?

AL: I was born in the state of Alisco in, um, approximately 150 miles northeast of Guadalejara.

JT: And that's in Mexico, right?

AL: It's in Mexico, yes.

JT: How long did you live there?

AL: There in Mexico?

JT: Yes.

AL: I was there up to when I was seventeen.

JT: Can you tell me about your family?

AL: Um, my family, my mom and dad, everybody, all my family is down there. My mom passed away recently.

JT: Sorry.

AL: And, uh, but the rest of my family is still down there except for a brother, older brother, that is currently here in Michigan, here in Holland.

JT: What was your life like when you lived in Mexico?

AL: Um, my life in Mexico was, uh, I consider it happy at times and sad at other times. We struggled quite a bit, quite a bit to survive. But as a child who as long as you have something to eat on the table and regardless of how good of a quality of food or quantity of food, if your stomach is full, you're pretty much happy.

JT: Where did you go to school?

AL: I didn't really have much of a classroom education while I was in my childhood. There wasn't any schools in our area because we were not in a city or in a village. We grew up as the oldest, I remember as far as when I was about four and a half years old. We lived about approximately, a pretty good seven or eight miles away from the nearest convenience store or the village. The government did send a teacher to go teach a class to some of these, out to the country, where maybe, I don't know how to translate that what we called it over there, a *ascienda*. Mainly they send a teacher to a big farmer house. In another word they called them *asciendas*, where the rich people lived. And there they gathered from the neighborhoods as far as a mile away radius. I'd say about a mile radius. Or it could even be farther than a mile radius, into the house because there was supposed to be a teacher to teach a class. The teacher would live there from week to week, at this *acienda*, at this big house. Of course, sharing with the rich person there, the owner of the *acienda*. He furnished what we call a garage. The only thing that a garage here is a lot nicer and a lot better shape than what it was a garage down there at that time. That's what he furnished to

use as a classroom. No concrete floors. No, just a little shade. It was a like a little hot. And a group of kids gathered around and tried to learn, or basically just enough to learn how to read and write. Not to a certain grade, but enough to make it and understand. They taught up to fourth grade. Which is in Mexico fourth grade, I would say that would be like a third grade level over here, pretty much. I went to school, my dad sent us to school one year, for a couple months out of one year. Then pulled us out again the following year, and maybe two years down the road we went back over there, went back to school. And for that reason, I didn't have enough education, classroom education. I learned enough, how to read and write, and math, the basic math. Just to maybe subtraction a little bit, never got to learn any of the percentages and so forth, up to now that I've moved up here. The reason for my dad to pull us out of school and not let us go to school, he has his. He was right up to certain point because we were ten members of the family, and we didn't own any land, we didn't own any house, we didn't have anything'. We worked for this big farmer. He lent us the house, the land. We farmed the land by hand or anyway we could. But we didn't have equipment, tractors, any sophisticated equipment to farm the land. We, the owner of the land would get fifty percent of our crop, which was corn and beans. So we got fifty percent, and he got fifty percent. In exchange we got a place to live. We worked, as I recall, since I was about five and a half years old. Sometimes even at that age, I'll get up at five thirty in the morning, sometimes four o'clock in the morning, and I would work until six or eight p.m. sometimes, on a harvest. When a harvest in full growing, we need to harvest. We were out in the field. You just don't look at the clock or the sun. We were out there at five o'clock in the morning and went home at sometimes eight o'clock at night. We didn't go home for lunch or anything, and my mom or one of the other younger brothers takes lunch for us out to the field where we were working, and we would constantly work. We didn't get paid for it at all. We just worked and worked. My dad didn't get paid for that either. All that we got, all that work just for the fifty percent of the crop, which was only once a year. If for some reason the crop was bad, the weather was bad and we didn't have a good crop, we hardly had enough corn and beans to eat. That was part of, one of the reasons my older brother immigrate out of the area. One of the reasons why people immigrate out of the area, because we just can't, we wanted to survive, we wanted to subcede, and we know we couldn't subcede in that work environment. Because we didn't have, even the house where we lived, it was built out of rocks, or cardboard on top or whatever they used, just enough to get you in the shade and not getting wet when it rains. We didn't have any city water or electricity or anything like that. When we were working out in the field, and doing things like that, we didn't have any flashlights, we didn't have anything like that. So basically there was nothing. Compared to what we have here now and what they have now a days out there, the same places where we were raised, born and grew, a lot of people now have electricity. They don't have the city water and so on, but they at least electricity. And you hardly see the houses where these people live now in the same conditions that they were back in those years. That's how our life really was over there and still is for a lot of people. But now a days the school system is better. They build not deluxe classrooms, but now they got they got their own classrooms elsewhere just specifically a classroom. The teachers are more, I should say, are

more educated into teaching. They are more responsible, because even back then the teacher sometimes they go and sometimes they don't. And there was no real educational system. Now a days they have a classroom just about every, I would say, about every two miles. About two mile radius, more than likely, you're going to find a classroom. Back then you didn't have that. In many cases you didn't have that for miles and miles and miles. You could not see a classroom. And another thing in the classroom situation, there was one teacher for all grades, so that's how it was. So my education, to go to the question that previously started all this, was up to second grade. And that's basically all I could. I wanted to go, I wanted to study. I liked the school and I think I learned quite a bit, but I didn't go up, not because I didn't know because I had to repeat a year, but due to the fact that this year when I started school this year and the following year I missed the year, I didn't go to school at all, so by the following year, when I returned to school, I had to go back and start all over again, and so forth.

JT: Were there any political conflicts at the time? Like I've heard personally a lot of things about Latin American, about how the government is not very friendly to the people, especially the ones that lived out near the villages and not in the cities. Did you run into any problems like that?

AL: Political conflicts, other than verbal, I don't think we ran into anything like that. We didn't run away because we were afraid of a cold war or anything like that, no.

JT: Was your family active in a church down in Mexico?

AL: Very.

JT: Yes, what religion?

AL: Catholic.

JT: Catholic.

AL: Yes, there is only one religion and there is really nothing else.

JT: What best do you remember about being active in your church?

AL: What?

JT: What do you remember the most?

AL: Basically, everything. I remember everything pretty much about is the same. I've been active. You go to church every Sunday, and there was a mass and if for some reason we didn't then we got our butts spanked or punished or somehow. Of course when we were a little older, when were kids we didn't have a choice, we didn't even argue. We just grew up in that environment that you just go. We give up something for lent. All other activities there are within the catholic church we were pretty much there. Especially my mom. She was a very highly catholic believer and she liked it like that.

JT: You had mentioned earlier that your family is still there, and that only you and your older brother immigrated here.

AL: Yes.

JT: Were you first, or was he first?

AL: He was first.

JT: Then when you came, did him being here have any affect on you deciding to leave?

AL: Not at all.

JT: No? You just decided independently?

AL: I decided independently to do that.

JT: What did your family in Mexico do about that? Were they angry? Were they upset?

AL: My dad was quite angry, yes. My mom was, I don't how to put it. She was not angry. She didn't agree with us, with our decision, but we pushed ourselves from our dad. We just told him that's it. We were like, no matter what you do, I'm a goner. We basically refused to live under those circumstances.

JT: Do you still keep in touch with your family?

AL: Oh yes.

JT: Yes.

AL: Oh yes.

JT: And they're very happy with you now?

AL: Well they were very happy just about all the time, even back then after a while. It was a little hard to make my dad understand that we needed a change, that we could not grow up like that. We could not subcede like that. We needed something better than what we had. And it was hard for him to understand that, but after a couple of years, he admitted basically.

JT: Why did you decide to come to the U.S. rather than go anywhere else, and why did you specifically pick Holland?

AL: I didn't specifically pick Holland because I came to Holland a couple years after I left the house. I went to, my first trip to the United States, I went to California. I worked there in California, although my brother was already here. I never came to him until about a couple years later.

JT: And he was in Holland?

AL: Yes. He's been in Holland all his life. Or, not all his life, but ever since he moved from down there. He somehow, he land over here.

JT: How did you get a Visa to enter the U.S.? What kind of legal issues did you have to deal with?

AL: I didn't.

JT: No?

AL: No. I fought the border patrol so many times. I struggled quite a bit to get across. I managed to get across and establish my legalization here. That's how I came across, that's how I came to the United States.

JT: When did you make the trip here and what type of transportation did you use to get here? How old were you?

AL: When I got here I was about twenty, when I got here to Holland. But I was seventeen when I left my hometown.

JT: What year was that?

AL: '76.

JT: How did you get here? What type of transportation did you use?

AL: To get here to Holland?

JT: To the United States.

AL: I used a bus to get up to the border and I crossed on foot to the California state. About twenty, twenty five or thirty miles into the United States. Then I worked there for a couple days, and then I met some other people, and we just kept moving up and so forth.

JT: Did anybody come with you?

AL: Not a family member or anybody like that, no.

JT: What kind of things went through your mind when you were riding the bus to the United States?

AL: A lot of things. I had my goals. I think I cried quite a bit on the way, but there was no turning back. I just had to go undiscovered because I didn't know anything about anything. I didn't even know how to get here. I just boarded the bus that told me that it would come to the border and I go from there.

JT: What were your first impressions of the United States?

AL: I think it was pretty cool. [laughing] I was amazingly surprised in many ways. First of all, the first thing that caught my eye, was the roads, the highways, how traffic moves over here, the difference. Cleaner, green grass all over wherever you go, like a California golf course. Everything was totally totally different.

JT: Did that make you feel better about your decision to come here when you saw that you could be so impressed? Did all that make you feel better about coming here?

AL: Certainly. Certainly did.

JT: What were your first impressions of Holland when you eventually got here?

AL: My first impression of Holland, it was good in a way and not so good in another way. Because when I came, the night that I arrived in Holland, we almost got stuck on the road, they were closing the roads because a snowstorm. And I was afraid. That particular night was, I arrived at night. But after I got out the next day and I started looking around, I discovered that the snow wasn't as cold as I thought it would be. I liked that.

JT: You said you lived in California when you first arrived?

AL: Yes.

JT: Why did you choose to live there?

AL: It wasn't a matter of choice to live there.

JT: Just the closest place?

AL: It was the closest, really close to the Mexican border and it was just about as far as I could go because at that time I was still an illegal alien and basically when you're under those kind of situations, you can't move. You're afraid to move, you're afraid to go out on the street, you're afraid to go even to the supermarket. You are afraid of getting caught and being deported into Mexico. Particularly, if you don't have enough money, or you didn't save enough money, or send any money. You're not afraid for your life, or because you won't be coming back, but you're afraid of being deported without being successful financially.

JT: What made you decide to come to Holland eventually?

AL: Well eventually, my brother was here, and I think it was a major thing that I wanted to be with him. I went about three years without seeing him. Me being in California a year or two already, I already knew my way around quite a bit. So, I said "I can do it. I can go over there and visit him."

JT: In California, where did you work and how did you get that job?

AL: Just by asking around. I went through the countryside, because I worked out on the farm picking oranges, apricots, tomatoes, whatever was available. When I didn't know where to look, I just went to the farmer out on the countryside. And if I saw a lot of oranges or a fruit orchard, it would be easy to find out who owned the orchard because there are big houses right in the orchard, or right aside. I just went, and asked for work.

JT: So your job there was pretty much the same as what you did at home?

AL: Yes. Out on the field, it's a very different type of work, but it was pretty much the same.

JT: Was it a lot better for you?

AL: Oh yeah it was. I worked a lot less and got paid a lot more. [laughing]

JT: Where did you work in Holland, and how did you get that job?

AL: When I came in I worked for H.A. Hines. My brother took me there and I applied for a job there. I'm still there.

JT: You're still there.

AL: I'm still there.

JT: Did you know English when you came here?

AL: Quite frankly, very little, very very little. I am still learning.

JT: How did you learn to speak it, and how did you learn how to deal with the language barrier?

AL: I don't know. I think it just came somehow by practicing it, I guess. Not being too shy about it, I guess. Admitting to the other people's comments when I say something. If they make fun of it, or something like that, I never took it in a bad way. I never got offended by it. And I still am made fun of. There are still some people that correct me. And I say "Well, thanks. Maybe next time I'll try and do it better." [laughing] Then I went to Community Education, which helped me quite a bit. I learned how to read and write, some. I still don't know too much, but I think I know enough. I got my G.E.D. through Community Ed, and as far as English on paper, that's where I learned about that. As far as speaking the language, I think I learned that more on the streets than in school.

JT: When you came here to Holland, were you accepted as an immigrant, or did you feel some hostility?

AL: I felt quite a bit of hostility at first. I did feel that. I don't know.

JT: Do you still feel that way, or do you feel at home now?

AL: It's really hard to say that you really feel at home. I feel pretty comfortable. Sometimes I don't think I even have another place to go. I feel like it's my home. I feel home.

JT: What specific events in your first years here in Holland do you really remember, what were your first impressions, and why were they so important to you?

AL: Well, just the events, other than the Tulip Parade and Tulip Time, that was quite impressive to me. The way the city of Holland keeps its streets during the summer, it really surprised me quite a bit. I went out to the tulip gardens over on Quincey Street. It impressed me quite a bit. It's a clean city. And again, I didn't know how other cities looked, or how they were, so when I came to Holland I came to a paradise. I felt that way. After a while, I've travelled. I went to Chicago. I went to Detroit. I went to even Grand Rapids, and other areas. I see the difference, a big difference. I don't think they're anything compared to Holland. I haven't seen any other place that compares to Holland yet.

JT: What would you say was the most difficult adjustment that you had to deal with?

AL: Deal with the different cultures. Deal with the different attitudes of people that see us as enemies, that see us as unwanted. I've been learning to adjust to that. There are still quite a lot of people out there that have bad impressions about people just because of

their color. That is still a big issue, but I don't really feel uncomfortable unless they directly told me something. If they said something to me directly, I might feel uncomfortable, but I would try to understand them and just cope with it some how.

JT: Have you ever considered returning to Mexico?

AL: I really doubt that I would. I go to Mexico every year. I go visit. I like to go over there and visit to be with my family. But if I was going to go to Mexico to work and make my living, certainly not.

JT: Who were your friends when you first came here, and did you know anybody else other than your brother?

AL: I didn't know anybody. I didn't know anybody. I met some friends through my brother. Friends, close friends, we only had one older family, a couple and their daughter, that were really considered our friends. They were there for us whenever we needed them. We felt like they supported us quite a bit on anything that we needed. And they were pretty much it.

JT: You mentioned that you go to visit your family have any come to visit you?

AL: They can't.

JT: No?

AL: They can't unless they cross the border just like I did, and that's not very easy. It's not possible. It's impossible. They have tried to get Visas, some of them, to come in legally, but their Visas are denied. That's why I came illegally. If you go ask for a Visa to come, they just won't do it. Sometimes even, you can get a Visa down there in Mexico, but when you get to the border, they still reject you. That's pretty sad.

JT: Yes. How have you dealt with raising your Mexican heritage children in an American Society?

AL: I have to give quite a bit of the credit to my wife, as far as that goes. As far as myself, we just live right along. We try not to forget our roots, or where we come from, and I don't think we ever will, but we try to subcede in this society. We try to cope with all the different cultures, and so forth.

JT: In what ways has the religious life here in Holland been similar or different compared to that in Mexico?

AL: It was a little different because you have pressure from others. It has been different. A lot different. Somehow the way that it is presented here is not quite the same as it is over there. Or it could be our imagination, but you just don't have the same feeling. I don't have the same feeling. I don't feel it. I don't feel it the same. There's something missing, I don't know what it is, but really it hasn't changed too much.

JT: And you're still with the Catholic Church?

AL: Yes.

JT: Good. What would you say has been the thing that has changed your life the most in coming here?

AL: Could you repeat the question again?

JT: What about your life has changed the most since you've gotten here and what do you think made that change?

AL: I think what made the change, and what it changed, was because I came here with a goals to meet, to survive, to subcede. Everything started from there. I got married, then the kids came, then everything else came from there. The whole cycle changed

with the years as the time passed. I've had a steady job since 1980. Our daughters, our son, they began to go to school. The education system over here is excellent, compared to the education system in which I grew up. I guess the main thing that changed the whole thing around, as far as our opinions, as far as our life, was to have this family to have the education that we didn't have, to give them the opportunity that we didn't have, to live a better life which we didn't have. That's basically the most important thing for us. That our kids go to college, to put their futures in their hands, and not in ours. We try to do our part to have them educated and to go to college. That is our goal to do that. The rest is up to them.

JT: Have you been happy here, and do you feel like you're successful in your goals?

AL: Yes, I have.

JT: Would you ever make the decision again to come here, would you ever immigrate again, would you ever go through it all over again?

AL: I would say so, yes. Maybe what I wouldn't want to go through is the suffering that I went through the first time. But if I knew what it was going to be like behind the suffering, I would do it again and again and again.

JT: One last question. How do you deal with the new immigrants that come to Holland?

AL: I try to understand them. I help them if I can. Knowing what I suffered through, I know there are other immigrants that came from even farther away, that struggled even more to get across the Mexican border, and then still had to struggle with the U.S. border.

JT: Well, that's it. Thank you.